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SUBJECT: EAST CHINA ACADEMICS ON CHINA-JAPAN RELATIONS: ASO WILL BE PRAGMATIC, DISCONNECT EXISTS BETWEEN OFFICIAL VIEW OF RELATIONS AND ACTUAL SENTIMENT

REF: A) SHANGHAI 276; B) SHANGHAI 804

CLASSIFIED BY: Christopher Beede, Political/Economic Chief, U.S. Consulate General, Shanghai, Department of State.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Japan experts in Shanghai and Nanjing believe new Japanese Prime Minister Aso, consumed by domestic political and economic challenges, will adopt a pragmatic approach to China regardless of his past anti-China rhetoric. Aso will attend the ASEM meeting in China in late October, but no major policy initiatives between Japan and China are expected to be announced. Despite Chinese Government and media efforts to emphasize positive aspects of the relationship, discussions in Nanjing reveal deep feelings of distrust and anger towards Japan stemming from unresolved historical issues. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Poloff met with scholars in Shanghai and Nanjing to discuss China's views of Japan's new Prime Minister Taro Aso and the future of the bilateral relationship. Academic interlocutors included Wu Jinan, Senior Fellow at the Shanghai Institute for International Studies (SIIS); Gao Lan, Associate Professor in the Institute of Asian-Pacific Studies, Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences (SASS); Xue Chen, Research Fellow at SIIS; Hua Tao, Professor at the Hopkins-Nanjing Center of Nanjing University; and Liu Litao, Associate Professor at the Nanjing University School of International Relations. Poloff also held a roundtable discussion with a dozen graduate students at Nanjing University School of International Relations.

Aso Will Behave Himself

¶3. (C) The academics believe Aso will "behave himself" in his new role as Prime Minister and refrain from engaging in behavior that would antagonize China. Although there is still "some concern" in China about Aso's past anti-China rhetoric, the academics expect him to focus primarily on domestic issues. He faces many domestic challenges, such as the flagging economy, the "disarray" within his ruling Liberal Democratic Party, and upcoming Lower House elections, according to Wu Jinan. These domestic constraints leave him little room to maneuver on foreign policy, forcing him to cooperate with China on international issues like the global economic crisis, energy, and North Korea, said the scholars.

14. (C) According to Xue Chen and Wu Jinan, although Aso is not "pro-China", he played a "vital role" in fomenting positive bilateral relations as Japan's Foreign Minister under the Abe administration (Note: Shinzo Abe was Prime Minister from September 2006 to September 2007. End note.) Aso also has good personal relations with some Chinese leaders. According to Wu, Aso met privately with his "good friend", former Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing, on September 16 on the sidelines of Li's visit to Tokyo to attend the 4th Beijing-Tokyo Forum. Aso also immediately accepted China's invitation to attend the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) in October, one of his first foreign visits as prime minister, an indication of the importance he places on Japan's relationship with China.

Nothing Major Expected at ASEM

15. (C) Aso is expected to meet with Chinese President Hu Jintao and Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao on the sidelines of ASEM later this month in Beijing. None of the academics expect any major bilateral announcements by China and Japan at the meeting, though the leaders may discuss North Korea and food safety issues. Gao Lan thinks both sides will use the occasion to showcase areas of cooperation, such as the recent agreement on joint development of the East China Sea gas fields. It will also provide Aso with a good opportunity to develop personal rapport with the Chinese leaders.

Relations Politically Mature

16. (C) The Shanghai academics cited many positive developments in the bilateral relationship this year, starting with Japan's assistance in the aftermath of the Sichuan earthquake (Ref A).

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Hua Tao also mentioned that, unlike many Western countries, Japan did not criticize China during the spring Tibet crisis. These factors, together with the Chinese Government's efforts to emphasize constructive aspects of the relationship, have led to more objective coverage of Japan and Aso by the Chinese media, according to Wu Jinan.

17. (C) Gao Lan thinks Sino-Japan relations have matured to a point where "it does not really matter who the prime minister is". The relationship will continue on its current positive trajectory centered mainly on the two countries' economic interdependence. For the Chinese, their main concern is how long the current Japanese prime minister will last, given the fact that the previous two have each lasted less than a year. (Note: Gao met with the Washington Bureau Chiefs of several Japanese newspapers, such as Asahi and Sankei, during her recent visit to the United States. She said they shared Chinese concerns that Aso may not last very long in his current position, even speculating that he may not last beyond this November. End note).

The Feelings Are Not Mutual

18. (C) Wu Jinan noted a survey conducted jointly by Japan's Yomiuri Shimbun and China's Xinhua News Agency in July this year in which 70 percent of Chinese respondents said current relations with Japan were positive whereas only 33 percent of Japanese respondents viewed relations with China positively. Gao Lan said Fudan University also conducted a similar poll recently which showed 60 percent of Chinese respondents think relations with Japan are positive while 40 percent of Japanese said the same about relations with China. Liu Litao of Nanjing University thinks this gap is due to China's growing confidence and Japan's increasing fear of China's rise. He mentioned that, in private conversations, some Japanese diplomats in China expressed fear of a return to a "tributary system" dominated by China. (Note: Liu was referring to an ancient system in which neighboring countries like Japan and Korea paid tribute to Imperial China in return for recognition of sovereignty and trade rights. End note.)

Disconnect Between Polls and Reality

¶9. (C) Despite these poll numbers and recent positive media coverage of Japan in China, Gao Lan thinks Chinese feelings toward Japan have "not fundamentally changed". The relationship must be viewed within the prism of the past several hundred years, not just the past couple of years, she said, and the poll numbers are "not very credible" since the methodology may be flawed. Hua Tao believes there is a disconnect between the Chinese Government's official view of Japan and the Chinese public's view of Japan. The Chinese people are still concerned about Japan's military capability and intentions. If Aso or other Japanese leaders visit Yasukuni Shrine, it would reaffirm Chinese people's suspicions of Japan.

History Still Matters...A Lot

¶10. (C) Liu Litao, a former military intelligence officer, went even further, saying Japan has been "unethical" and has failed to muster support for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council because it has not come clean about its "historical crimes". This sentiment was echoed during a roundtable discussion with a dozen Nanjing University graduate students, who view historical issues as the main obstacle to better relations. They said they know in their minds that history is only one aspect of the relationship, and relations between the two countries have improved on other fronts, but emotionally, they still carry deep-rooted feelings of "suspicion" and "anger" towards Japan. They appeared conflicted in their views toward Japan, expressing anger yet admitting to buying Japanese products and wanting to visit Japan. They said Chinese students who were exchange students in Japan came back with positive views of the country, and the future relationship hinges on more such exchanges between the younger generations. As one student said, the Chinese people are angry at Japanese politicians and not necessarily the Japanese people. Several students shared the sentiment that, as long as Japanese politicians do not stir up emotions by visiting Yasukuni Shrine

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and adding right-wing revisions to textbooks, bilateral relations could improve. The Japanese would decide the future course of relations through their own actions, they asserted.

Comment

¶11. (C) Chinese views on Japan are not uniform across East China, as revealed by the fact that scholars in Shanghai were noticeably more upbeat about the relationship than scholars and students in Nanjing, a city that for historical reasons has harbored a higher degree of anti-Japanese sentiment. It came as somewhat of a surprise that, despite some of the positive developments in bilateral relations this year, negative sentiment towards Japan in Nanjing had not changed much, if at all, since Poloff's previous visit there in December 2007 (Ref B). This underlined the depth of emotions and disconnect between the positive image of the bilateral relationship portrayed by the Chinese Government and media and actual sentiment on the ground.

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